

Save my heart

by Tatistus

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Summary: Kotoko has suddendly changed. Her personality is no longer bubbly and cheerful, and what's worst, she's not chasing after Naoki anymore! What is going on? Please R&R!

1. Chapter 1

Hi minna-san! I just thought of an idea that I wanted to explore and I hope you may find it entertaining. Please let me know your thoughts. Thanks!

* * *

><p>Naoki was content with the way his life was turning out to be in the last few months. He obviously was not happy because of his father's illness, and certainly, it was not too interesting to work at Pandai, but he achieved to connect with an excellent business partner willing to invest in the company which would save its financial future. His father was recovering successfully in the hospital and his mother barely showed herself at home, causing that a very willing Kotoko started to "cook" and help around the house to support Noriko and her family. Watching her as she waved him goodbye every morning with a warm smile and as she was eager every night to take his coat and suitcase to help him rest was comforting. This routine was going to be interrupted once his parents were back from the hospital and he transferred to the medical faculty with the endorsement that he already had received from his family, but still he would be walking her to university daily and if their schedules matched, they would commute back together as well.<p>

At the beginning, he was a bit scared of his apparent dependence to Kotoko, to see her, to hear her, to interact with her, but now he was more comfortable with his feelings. What feelings where those? He was to find out yet but he figured it was just a mere habit of having her around. Surely, he had kissed her twice, but it should not mean a lot to him being an adult with his emotions under complete control. First kiss was to make a point. Second kiss was a whimsical moment. That is

it.

In a Sunday shiny summer morning Kotoko was in the living room with her father, smiling and humming a cheerful song while they waited for Shigeki and Noriko's arrival from the hospital. It was quite a joyous moment for the Irie Family and their two guests since Shigeki was having a more than satisfactory recovery and everything would be back to normal. The couple indeed arrived and the household felt livelier and warmer. They all shared a delicious meal provided by Shigeo expert hands and the rest of the afternoon and evening was peaceful as they were all trying to create a restful environment so Shigeki could have a speedy recovery.

* * *

><p>Serene weeks went by, Naoki was already a medical student, Shigeki went back to Pandai healthier than ever and all regular activities were resumed by the Iries and their guests. Nevertheless, one day, Naoki felt a disruption in his comfortable routine. Where was Kotoko in his day to day? She wasn't walking with him to university, she was not going back home with him, she was not having breakfast or dinner with him on weekdays, she wasn't even pestering him on weekends. On Saturdays and Sundays, she would eat without looking at him or asking him annoyances, moreover she would barely stay at home and no one knew where she was going besides her father. Just what on earth was she doing?<p>

"Now your life is perfect, nee oniichan?" Said Yukki one of those Kotoko-less Sundays, while they both were reading books, sitting in the living room couch.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you are studying a career that fulfills your expectations, you saved yourself from having to work at Pandai and now Kotoko lost interest in you. Sad the guy she is dating is that idiot, even I think she deserves better. Geezâ€| " Yukki looked over his book to take a look of his big brother's expression or reaction but he didn't find a pinch of interest. Nothing, not even a question of just who was she dating. Yukki sighed and stood up.

"Kotoko warned me about your lack of interest in her love life, but still I thought you wanted to know who her boyfriend is since three weeks ago. Don't you feel even slightly curious?"

"Since when am I sticking my nose in strangers' business? I certainly hope you are not adopting such low practice Yukki, it would disappoint me a little."

"I must disagree. Showing interest in the life of someone who has been living with us for such a long time is not being nosy. Kotoko may be as silly as the next one, but that does not mean she doesn't belong to this family. You being this irrational means that the fact is indeed affecting you, isn't it?"

"Nonsense, it is you who is being irrational. Tell okaasan I'll take a stroll and won't be back for dinner." And just like that he went out without a real route in mind.

* * *

><p>"Me, affected for her dating someoneâ€| Utter gibberish, why would I care the less about her love life? She can kiss and hug whomever the hell she wants. Isn't she a free person? It's not my business, I'm not interested and I won't spare another thought to such trivial subject. That woman used to declare her love for me not long ago and now she's dating someone else. Is that what she wants? So be it.

It was already night when Naoki walked into a convenience store to get ramen and water, and alas, there she was right in the bread aisle.

"Kotoko." She just looked up to him and gave him a lazy smile.

"Hi Irie-kun. Fancy seeing you here at this hour." She was holding a market basket with sliced bread, ham, sliced cheese, two apples, two bananas, two popsicles and a liter of apple juice.

"Hm. Are you alone?" According to the items in the basket, she was definitely not alone.

"No, I'm with my boyfriend. Do you want to meet him?" She never took her eyes from his, but without a doubt, there was something strange in the way she was looking at him.

_"No, I might punch him in the throat." _"Yes, why not?" Unnoticed to Kotoko, his hands were pressing the ramen package way much harder than necessary. "Well, where is your boyfriend?"

Boyfriend. A bitter taste in his mouth and an unusually fast heartbeat made its presence in Naoki's body.

"Kotoko move your ass! I won't be waiting for you all night! Where the hell are you!?" That voice, Naoki had the strong feeling of recognizing that damn voice.

Kotoko's body tensed up immediately. "I have to go Irie-kun, maybe you can meet him some other time! I think I won't be going home tonight, please tell obasan for me, nee?" And just like that she ran away from the aisle and to the cash register. Just when Naoki wanted to follow her some little nice old lady tripped and fell in front of him. While he was helping her up at a very slow pace, he heard the 'ding' of the main entrance opening and closing again.

"What the hell just happened and who's the bastard she's dating?"

2. Chapter 2

Tedium. Life was so dull without the excitement that her chaos conveys. Besides boredom, there was another feeling:

Loneliness. No one makes him feel so 'at home' like she does. No one else provokes the need to vent and reveal his true sensations. Only she is capable of saying the right words in the exact moment that they are needed. This cascades to:

Anger. She comes barging into his life, creates a disturbance of

his status quo, brings noise to his household, makes his mother stupidly happy, gives him a career path, provides his brother lessons of humility and perseverance and even saves his life, and then she simply leaves their house and disappears _with that imbecile!_ Which brings yet another emotion:

Preoccupation. Even if she is not the most skilled student, she was indeed showing satisfactory signs of improvement, so why did she have to quit university? Why did she had to go as far as living with a stupid boyfriend, only two measly months into the relationship? How does she dare to make his father miserable, forcing him to age the equivalent of two years in only two months?

Surely studying to be a doctor was pleasing and challenging even though he evidently could understand facts and learn skills very much faster than his classmates learn, but still those horrid feelings inside him did not allow him to fully enjoy this stage in his life. Something was amiss and since he didn't liked it he decided he was to recover it. Fast. His resolution was made stronger by the memory of her being awfully yelled at the convenience store. Unquestionably, when Kotoko called him 'meanie', she did not know what kind of dumbass she was going to have in her life. Was he always such an asshole to her? Those were the thoughts that accompanied Naoki while he was commuting from university, not to home, but to her workplace. Nevertheless, nothing prepared him to see what he was seeing right then: a frightened and running Kotoko who bumped into him and, as she looked up to his face and started formulating a quick excuse, she realized who he was and dragged him with an unknown force to an ally.

"What is wrong with you, you should be moreâ€¦" His words died in his throat as he saw her left cheek red and swollen, with a thin trickle of blood coming out of the left corner of her lips. Her tearful eyes and trembling body told him more than any word that she could say, but still he needed her to speak up.

"Irie-kun please go home, I beg of youâ€¦ You don't have any business in this area. Just leave!"

"Where did you get injured that much?" He was trying his best not to convey with his voice how mad or scared he was. He could kill someone right now and then take her to a place where no damned one could touch her again.

"Iâ€¦ I just tripped and fell, you know how I am. This neighborhood is not safe for you. I'll pay you a visit some other day, ok? Nice seeing you Irie-kun. Bye bye! So long!"

"I am not leaving unless you come with me to a doctor."

"I'm in a hurry right now, maybe some other day. Please leave now!"

"No! Is someone chasing you? I won't leave you here!" _"Why isn't she providing more details? I need to understand what is going on!"_

"I just need you to go home so he won't find you! He will be so angry, he is drunk, I don't want anything to happen to you, I don't want otousan to find out about this, and you are just complicating everything! I can perfectly handle this by myself so go away!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Just what am I complicating?" His eyes were bigger with each of her replies, he just couldn't believe that the fearful and hurt Kotoko was the brave and cheerful girl he used to know.

"So if you want to stay here be my guest. Nice to see you." Kotoko started marching to resume her previous route and Naoki was a couple of steps behind her when a sudden shadow tackled her down with a scream.

"So you're already cheating on me bitch? Moreover, with that bastard!? Say I'm better than him! Say it!"

Naoki already had his hands clenching the drunk idiot that dared to hurt her again and without much effort, he throw him some meters away. Then he took her hand and dragged her while running away from a very confused and disoriented drunkard.

"Let go of me right now Irie-kun, he must be injured and this is just making everything worst!"

"I must differ and until I see you safe I won't leave you alone."

"I can't go to your place; I don't want otousan to see me like this."

"Then let's go to my apartment."

They kept running until Naoki stopped a cab and they hopped in, complete silence surrounding them. He never let go of her hand though, like if she was going to fade away if he did so.

"This is a freaking nightmareâ€¦! She doesn't deserve this, so why is she living like this? I want to kill that scumbag!"

3. Chapter 3

Naoki was sitting down in his apartment's bed, waiting for Kotoko to finish her bath. He was still furious about the state of her face, but he decided to act calmly because it was her life and since he barely let her into his he felt he could not have much say on hers. Still this was his rationale, but his emotions told him otherwise, to grab her and never let go of her. Kotoko left the bathroom and knelt in front of him, on the bare floor. She was wearing her own clothes instead of the ones that he provided, drying her hair with a small towel, never looking at him.

"Thanks for allowing me to come here and use your bathroom. You should not have to worry yourself." He didn't answer. She stood up, still not looking at him, and left the towel in the back of one of the dining table seats. She combed her hair into a bun with her fingers and straightened her clothes.

"I'll be leaving, thanks again. Please don't tell anything to my father or anyone, I will handle this situation with him and I would not like him to hear about this happening by other's words." Her eyes weren't meeting his, her smiled never showed.

"That's what you call it? 'Happening'? How long has this been going on?" He stood up and approached until only a couple of steps were separating them. She kept looking the door.

"Goodbye Irie-kun. Oh, and please don't go to that neighborhood again, is not safe. Say hi to your family." Kotoko placed her hand on the doorknob, but a grip on her arm made her hiss with pain. Naoki immediately released her arm, understanding that her long sleeved blouse was hiding more injuries. His fists were ready to beat the soul out of that imbecile who dared to put a hand on her.

"That Ikezawa was supposed to love you; he chased you for so many years so why is he beating you that badly?"

"This is something between Kin-chan and I, please stay out of it."

"And you are still calling him 'Kin-chan'! What is wrong with you, besides being stupid! You definitely lack of self-respect, you really deserve what is happening to you!" He scarcely had finished the phrase and he was already regretting it. He knew she was more than worthy of being loved and cared for because of all of the happiness that she emitted and enlightened other people's lives. She looked at him for the first time since they arrived and his stomach sunk at the sight: her badly swollen eye and cheek, the slightly purple corner of her lips, and her unreservedly sad eyes were killing him. She offered him a bitter smile.

"It seems like the respect that you have for me is the same that I have for myself." She turned her face to the door and opened it. "So patheticâ€| Thanks again, please have dinner, it's past time."

"Kotoko, waitâ€|" She stopped, her back to him, and her head hung low.

"I hope you don't have to see me much, from now on I'll try my best to stay away from your life." She walked away without looking back to him. He felt completely miserable and yet he was unable to move, to run for her.

"Kotoko, don't leaveâ€| Stayâ€|" He whispered, but she was already out of sight.

* * *

><p>The rain was pouring outside. He was only able to eat because she told him so, but the petrifying thought of her being in danger was keeping him from sleeping. He called home and informed he would not be going until tomorrow. Was she that in love with Ikezawa, as much as to put up with him beating her? What about her love for himâ€|? He felt powerless and lonely. He wanted to protect her but she forbid him from telling anyone about this. Naoki thought it could be as simple as just calling the cops and get her free from the bastard. He even could go and beat the idiot senseless and warn him not to get close to her ever again, but something in him told him to respect her and to act against his logic. Only she who could make him act contrary to rationality; no one else would never put him in that position. It was her power and she didn't even know it. He tried to sleep, but sleep was not an option that night. He tried to read but

words and pages danced erratically in front of him. He just needed one thing to have peace: her. But then again there was a problem with that: she did not want his help. Naoki closed his eyes and buried himself under the covers, demanding himself to stop thinking and, what is more, to stop feeling.<p>

The next morning Naoki headed to university, sleep deprived and worried to no end. To hell with her decision, he was not going to allow Ikezawa to beat her anymore. He just needed to inform his teacher that he won't be going to his practical and then he would go to Kotoko's workplace. Or that's what he thought. After talking with his teacher he was leaving the medical building when Kotoko materialized herself before him, wearing a surgical mask and sunglasses. She gently touched his left arm with only her fingertips and that was enough to send electricity through all his body. Kotoko, not letting go of his arm, softly and quietly led him outside the campus and into a little cafe. They took sits in a booth, almost away from strangers' looks. Nor she or he had emitted a single sound. She was looking intently to his arm that had served as support for her and that she was still slightly holding from across the table. He was trying to take a better look of her face, covered as it was. The waiter came and she asked for black coffee for them both.

"They serve a pretty good coffee here, Irie-kun; have you ever tried it?"

"No. Kotoko, I wanted toâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I would like to apologize for yesterday's words. I do not think even remotely that you deserve this."

"Don't worry, it is me who has to apologize to you. You should have never been involved in this. Actually, I came to explain what you saw so you don't have to feel forced to help in any way. I promise I will not involve you in my life beyond explaining what you saw yesterday." Naoki's face was stoic, but inside he was both scared about what he was about to hear and excited to feel Kotoko's touch. So little it took for her to make him happy, sadly he was going to hear something he guaranteed as awful so his happiness was not total.

"Explain." He demanded. "And remove your sunglasses and mask." She hesitated briefly, and then said: "You are about to hear my side of the story, so I guess it is silly to try to hide my face from youâ€¦" She took off her accessories, revealing not only the injuries from yesterday but also some other fresher in the right side of her face. The little skin that wasn't purple or yellowish from the smacks went red from embarrassment. Naoki's poker face mutated from apparent indifference to total disbelief and anger.

"Let's go to the police. Now." He was about to stand up and she stopped him taking his arm and making him sit again.

"You said you wanted me to explain, so I will explain. Please listen to me, Irie-kun."

Fury bolted through his veins, yet her delicate touch in his arm helped him to be calmer.

"I'm listening, Kotoko. And I truly hope this state of yours has a solid explanation."

Surprisingly, Naoki laid his hand on top of hers. Her softness and warmthâ€¦ It had been awhile and nonetheless he was not able to fully enjoy this experience. His heart was irately racing out of pure hatred towards Ikezawa, but part of his accelerated heartbeat was because of her closeness.

Her surprised showed on her face, her eyes wide open for a couple of seconds before she shut them close. Taking a deep breath, she started narrating.

"I think I fell in love with Kinnosuke. I thought I loved you, but I guess it was admiration and caring more than love. Kinnosuke showed me his love for years and years until I finally realized that I couldn't bring anything good to you, but instead I could be supportive and in reality helpful to his life. When we started dating he had some issues with his family, he was in bad terms with some of them. His mother fell ill and he was travelling back and forth, trying at the same time to work at my dad's place and the university's cafeteria to keep gaining experience to become a good chef. He always wanted to prove himself before my eyesâ€¦ It was an impossible task to travel so often to Osaka and at the same work in two places. He eventually had to quit the cafeteria job and made an agreement with dad to work as much shifts as possible. I tried to be supportive and started working as a waitress at dad's restaurant and also at the ramen place. It wasn't much money, but at least I could help dad a bit with his money issues. In the end, his mother died a painful deathâ€¦ The whole process, illness and death, made Kinnosuke's soul a bit bitter and his patience felt to the ground. It's pretty understandable and well, you know me, I can't stay out of trouble, soâ€¦"

"So you fell in love with him and you allow him to beat you so he can feel better? Is that what love causes? Is that what you wanted me to feel for you?"

"It's not like thatâ€¦ I know you could never love me, I'm lucky enough that you don't hate me. I did wanted you to feel love for me, but I understood that wanting is not being able to achieve. I'm helping Kinnosuke, I'm trying to support everyone, I like helping people and I know this is just a stage in Kinnosuke's sorrow. Just please don't tell anything to anyone, especially dad. I want to protect him too, pleaseâ€¦ justâ€¦" Her voice cracked, she wasn't able to finish the sentence as tears run down her cheeks.

"So, you really never loved me?" He looked intently to her eyes, never letting her hand go.

"That's not important nowâ€¦" Her gaze meet the ground.

"Just answer."

"I don't think soâ€¦" Naoki never got to understand if she was shaking or not, since she retrieved her hands away from his. The pain of her injuries and her status took place in his chest.

"Are you saying you went away from mâtâ€¦ my place and quitted university just out of loveâ€¦ for Ikezawa?"

She looked at him again, tears still flowing from her eyes. "Yes. I'm acting out of love. It is because of love that I'm doing what I'm

doing. Once you fall for a nice girl, you will understand that you want to protect and make happy the ones you love. And that will be a very lucky girl, you know?" Naoki suddenly stood up and threw a couple of bills over the table.

"If that's love, I don't want to love. Ever. Love is painful Kotoko, it's lonely and is full of fear."

He marched to the cafe's door and left without looking back. His walking became jogging and then sprinting. He needed to calm down.

"Kotoko being beaten by Ikezawa. Protecting Ikezawa. Loving him instead of me? Couldn't she just protect me?! I would never beat her, I would take care of her, I would help her father, I would and she won't let me! Damn it!"

4. Chapter 4

Three weeks had passed since Naoki and Kotoko's meeting in the cafe. Her face was now in a better condition as well as her arms and legs. Kinnosuke left their apartment early to go grocery shopping for her dad's restaurant and would not be back until late at night. She breathed deeply to find some motivation to get out of bed. Last night she was afraid of a beating for not letting him sleep with her. He actually pushed her quite hard and made her fall, but immediately after, he profusely apologized just as he did every time he mistreated her. It was a neverending loop of treating her like garbage and then asking for forgiveness. At least he promised not to hit her in the face so her father wouldn't notice. Last time she was lucky Shigeo was visiting her mother's grave.

Would she ever let Kinnosuke have sex with her again? Never, said a voice in her head, but still she knew it was near impossible. She just needed to keep making up excuses to prolong the inevitable and pray for that day to never come. Their first time she forced herself to drink to numb the nauseous sensation but it didn't work as expected. She didn't like it though he tried to be as gentle and considerate as possible. How could she enjoy having sex with an obligation?

Lazily she got out of bed and dragged her body to the small kitchen to brew some coffee. She had never enjoyed being alone until she started living with him. She definitely missed being pampered by Ms. Irie or playfully fight with Yukki-kun. She missed Naoki. And by missing Naoki she felt pathetic for loving him so much it hurt. Three weeks earlier, though injured, she felt happy by seeing him and then being at his apartment was 'cherry on top'ish. Then going to that cafe with him, touching him, feeling his concern. None of those moments were happy, but she felt happy anyway. These last four months were a dantesque nightmare, so why not feel happy with something as small as seeing and touching him?

She washed the few dishes that were to be washed and cleaned the entire house. It was only 8am by then and her shift at the ramen shop started in a couple of hours. What to do until then? She was less and less fond of visiting her dad's restaurant just to avoid as much contact with Kinnosuke as possible. Maybe she could go to university to have a glimpse of him. Not the smartest choice, but hey, nobody

expected her to be smart, soâ€¦ She wore a nice lacy white sleeveless shirt and a pair of jeans and took off to Tonan. She just wanted to look at him and then she would leave to the ramen shop. Only a short glimpse. Three weeks without seeing him was more than awful.

Kotoko arrived to Tonan and headed to the medical faculty. She didn't have much time so she walked quickly and hoped for a sight of him. Just when she was arriving to her destination, a pair of hands laid on her shoulders, stopping her and her heart.

"_If this is Kinnosuke, I'm deadâ€¦"_ She shut her eyes closed, tensed her shoulders, covered her face and waited for a smack but nothing happened. She sacredly turned and saw a tired face, dark circles under each eyes, a dry skin and a somewhat messy hair. Still, his mouth was showing an almost imperceptible smile. Her heart went from no beating to beating way too much and a stupid smile showed to her face.

"Irie-kun, hi."

"What are you doing here?"

"I was justâ€¦ wellâ€¦ taking a stroll, remembering good old times."

"I see." Naoki's face showed boredom, but he was ecstatic. It was the first time in four months seeing her smile. He needed more smiles like that in his life to stop feeling worried, lonely, angry and regretful. Her face had completely healed and her rosy cheeks were expressing happiness.

"It was nice seeing you Irie-kun. Say hi to your family for me please. Have a beautiful day!" Naoki didn't want her to bid him farewell, it was too short time to enjoy her presence.

"Are you leaving now?"

"Yes, my shift will start in 40 minutes and it is a long walk from here, you knowâ€¦ Hey! Where are you taking me?" As if it was their thing now, Naoki took Kotoko's hand and pulled her to one of the laboratories, the farthest one.

"What are we doing here?" Kotoko looked a bit surprised. She stood next to the door while Naoki looked outside the dusty window; it was obvious that this laboratory had not been used in a long time. He didn't answer her question, his head couldn't find an appropriate reason for them to be there.

"Irie-kun, I don't understandâ€¦ Do you need to tell me something? Do you want me to tell you something?"

"No. Well, yes. How have you been? Has heâ€¦?"

"No, he has not beat me that much lately. Things are getting better, now he is not drinking that much and his grieve for his mother is not as full of anger as before."

"But he keeps thrashing you."

"I would not call it 'thrashing'â€¦" He marched right next to and

grabbed her shoulders.

"Then what do you call it Kotoko? Caressing? Pampering?"

"It's not like that. It's not something you need to understand or worry about." She walked past him and took a sit in an old chair, covering her face with both hands. "You just need to focus on studying and living peacefully. I'm focusing on making my loved ones happy." She looked at him and saw him kneeling in front of her.

"Am I still included in that category? Last time you told me I'm not but you came to look for me today. You still love me, don't you? There is a huge reason behind your relationship with Kinnosuke, am I right? You are hiding something and I willâ€¦"

Kotoko cradled his face in her hands. "You look tired Irie-kun. Is school hard for a genius?" She finished the sentence with a smile and kissed his forehead, keeping her lips close to his skin for a long time. "Stay healthy, eat correctly and sleep enough. I'm sure the girls in your class are not happy seeing your tired face." She traced his eyebrows with her thumbs, never letting go of his face. He closed his eyes in response and she caressed his eyelids lightly. After that she planted a light kiss on his lips. And then another. And then a longer one. And then a stronger one that made Naoki move his lips in response. He cuddled her face and kissed her deeper until she broke the kiss. She smiled to him once more, a sad look settled in her eyes.

"Don't worry about me, I know what I'm doing and yes, there is a big reason for me to live with Kinnosuke. You don't need to know that reason, no one does. Just trust me, I know how to handle this situation. I'm running late Irie-kun, take care of yourself."

Kotoko stood up and walked to the door.

"Why did you kiss me?" He was still kneeling in front of the now empty chair. She turned her face to him and smiled.

"Because I always wanted to have a second kiss, so stealing it from you was my best shot. I hope you don't wash your mouth with soap!" And then she left.

Naoki touched his lips, still warm and humid. _"So it is true. The two things I've been pondering about for the last 4 months are true. She's hiding something. And I'm in love with her."_

* * *

><p>AN: Please leave your kind review! I'm not sure if I should make this fic rated M... What do you think?

Thanks for reading!

End
file.